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ABSTRACT

Child sexual abuse continues to be a problem despite efforts towards prevention. The burden of protecting children still falls mainly on women, yet society's general attitudes take away from women the tools they need to do this job. Mothers of sexually abused children have been blamed for their daughters' abuse because of their emotional neediness, passivity, multiple marriages, masochistic suffering, frigidity, and dependency. The preponderance of family systems theory led to the beliefs that when speaking of father-daughter incest, the marital relationship breaks down, the mother is unable to practice her roles as wife and mother, she encourages the oldest daughter to become a substitute, and it is her fault that any of this happened. The newer literature points to the importance of empowering women so that children will be protected. Research has begun to examine the men who were abusing their daughters or sons and found they were having relations with their wives at the same time. Differences in the amount of power men and women have in society was seen as contributing to occurrences of abuse. Women who are themselves abused have little chance of helping their children. If the goal is to end abuse, women must be strengthened with real competence so that they do not feel any need for vengeance. Mothers universally developing confidence, reaching out from isolation, and becoming in tune with their children will help protect future generations. (ABL)

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A Review of the Mommy Trap in Child Sexual Abuse

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Child sexual abuse continues to be a problem despite efforts towards prevention. The burden of protecting children still falls mainly on women, yet society's general attitudes take away from women the tools they need in order to do this job. Early psychological literature added to this debasement, although there has been a turn around since the late 1970's. A review is given of these patterns. The newer literature points to the importance of empowering women so that children will be protected. A general discussion of useful concepts and actions that move people towards empowerment follows.

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Although the subject of child sexual abuse increasingly receives more and more attention designed to aid prevention, the numbers still tell us that abuse continues to be a severe problem. From an estimated number of 60,000 cases of child maltreatment in 1974, 2.4 million cases were reported in the 1980's.[1] The pains inflicted on any child affect all of us. There have been national studies on prison populations saying that 80 to 90% of inmates report having been abused as a child.[2] Other studies indicate that as many as one out of every four girls and boys have been exposed to some sort of sexual abuse.[3] All of this means that child abuse is not a subject that can be ignored since it will become increasingly rare for anyone not to be touched by abuse through their extended family, friends, or neighbors, or avoid becoming the victim of a criminal previously victimized.

Circumstances of abuse only add to the many obvious burdens of parenting. When child abuse occurs, both non-offending and abusive parents suffer. Deep within they all fear the associated pain and true feelings of helplessness. Perpetrators, the majority of whom still are male, actually are repressing these emotions as they act out.[4] The stress is especially great for mothers who continue to be the primary caregivers of most children in our society.[5] The importance of early attachment and bonding to the mother is well documented.[6] The burden of childrearing in our society still falls mainly on women. Father care is still frequently referred to as "babysitting."

Even without abuse complicating any interactions, our culture is permeated with mother blame. A mother is not allowed to be ill, tired, or depressed. She cannot go to work or out for an

evening without being responsible for everything that happens while she is gone. For any mother to survive the raising of a child to adulthood, she must be able to fend off enormous amounts of guilt constantly thrown at her in our world. Psychology has pointed out that as children gain independence through natural development they have to give up their illusions of grandeur and the omnipotence of their parents. Most of the resulting rage due to the betrayal of all-powerfulness, is mobilized toward the mother partially because she still usually spends more time with the child. She is even culpable when there are no other neighborhood children at home for her child to play with on a given afternoon. In any family one only has to think about who is questioned if an object cannot be found. If even mom cannot find the object it is then considered her fault that it remains lost.

Historical Review of Anti-Mother Psychological Literature

In practice therapists have been among the worst perpetrators of the mommy fault myth. There have been scenes in offices where mothers were held responsible for their children's hyperactivity, aggression, psychosis, learning disabilities, and bedwetting. It is true that not all moms have reacted well to these problems. They are responsible for their own behavior, but that does not mean they caused the difficulties. Going along with the general trends of society the early psychological literature dealing with abuse also viewed mothers in the pejorative. The writings coincided in time with the highly respected development and dominance of family systems theory. The larger systems of community and society were ignored. Family pathology was

labelled as the problem and then each family member was described separately. This emphasis on family led the writings to focus on father-daughter incest.

Kaufman, Peck, and Taguiri described non-offending mothers of incest victims in a 1954 clinical study "as being needy in an emotional sense."[7] In 1955 Weinberg labelled "these woman" as "masochistic."[8] Cormier, Kennedy, and Sangowicz in 1962 found the mothers in their sample to be "so passive and submissive to their husbands that they were unable to protect their daughters from them."[9] In 1966, Lustig, et. al., said the mother "appeared to be the cornerstone in the pathological family system."[10] He saw the mothers of sexual abuse victims as being pathologically enmeshed with their daughters, having poor sexual relationships, having been married more than once, and being dependent on other women and emotionally hostile to them at the same time. Tormes wrote about mothers in incestuous families in 1968 "that she seems to have been deprived of self-fulfillment even within the family," and accused mothers of "secondary gains from their endless suffering."[11]

Maisch concluded in 1973 that in a high percentage of families the parent's sexual relationship had already lapsed prior to the incest and that the mothers unconsciously pushed their daughters into taking their place beside the father. Women in these situations were called "frigid."[12] It was considered a wife's duty to endlessly nurture despite any state of affairs. If she failed at what was perceived as her duty she was accused of arranging role reversals so that there would be no lapse in services. Forward and Buck reinforced this thinking in 1978 by describing the mother as the "silent partner."[13] In the same year Meiselman gave the mother the characteristics of "passivity,

dependency, and masochism,"[14] and in 1979 Justice and Justice summed up mothers as "colluding."[15] Giaretto also did not help in 1978 when he wrote, "As a general rule, the mother will admit eventually that she was party to the incestuous situation and contributed to the underlying causes."[16] If mothers really are as regressed as they have been described in the traditional literature then of course they would "eventually" admit their alleged guilt just as most hostages will "eventually" say what their captors desire.

The preponderance of family systems theory led to the beliefs that when speaking of father-daughter incest, the marital relationship breaks down, the mother is unable to practice her roles as wife and mother, she encourages the oldest daughter to become a substitute, and it is her fault that any of this happened. Yet it is obvious that the sexual assault of a child cannot be excused by any amount of maternal negligence. Even though these writings were about incest, all of the above literature influenced professional thinking. In 1980 Dietz and Craft studied protective service workers. Despite the result that 78% thought both battering and incest happening at the same time, 87% of the workers still thought the mother was collusive.[17]

More Recent Pro-mother Psychological Literature

Traditional views of the nuclear family and male and female roles dominated the theories described. Wattenberg felt that some theories evolved simply because it is usually the mother who is available for therapy.[18] The mother inadequacy concept is especially useless when trying to explain non-family abuse or

even abuse of other family members. During the 1970's the women's movement led to the grassroots development of shelters for women in domestic violence situations. As time passed it became evident to many of the shelters that the families who arrived often brought with them either past or present child sexual abuse experiences. In spite of some hesitation in addressing the resulting problems since resources were already scarce and the center of attention might be swept away from women and put on children, most shelters found themselves recognizing that the abuses were related. In the late 1970's and early 1980's the professional literature began to reflect the shelter movement and to deal with the societal and cultural context in which incest and child abuse occurs.

In 1978 Butler noted the "conspiracy of silence" that surrounds and allows abuse, and felt that previous writings about incest were based on misogyny and excuses.[19] Keeping abuse a secret gives the perpetrator the ability to continue the maltreatment. Previous characterizations of the fathers in incestuous families had made him the victim of some sort of personal turmoil such as the loss of a job or alcohol consumption that impeded his ability to control his impulses. That personal disturbances are only triggers for the abuse and not causes becomes apparent when we think about how many child sexual abuse offenses are committed on the street in front of a policeman even when the perpetrator is intoxicated. If uncontrollable urges due to private crisis were anything more than a justification then some of these assaults would happen at embarrassing moments.

Groth and Birnbaum documented in 1979 that when men were having relations with their daughters or sons, they were in addition to rather than instead of their wives.[20] Those who

confined their sexual activity to children did so because of their own choices. In 1981 Herman wrote, "...mothers who have been rendered unusually powerless within their families for whatever reason, often tolerate many forms of abuse, including, sexual abuse of their children."[21] This is what the shelters were seeing. It points to how the differences in the amount of power men and women have in society contribute to occurrences of abuse. Males are seen as powerful and females as powerless. The impotence of the circumstances that women finds themselves in, rather than a flawed personality that allows the abuse.

In Duluth there is a program that is based on the theory that abuse stems from the inappropriate use of power.[22] Under this program if a man is charged with battering his wife, he has the choice of incarceration or participating in the program. The basis of the program is the concept of a wheel with the words power and control in the center and the spokes reaching out to labels of various types of abuse including sexual, physical, financial, and emotional. The message is that underlying all types of abuse is the quest for power and control.

McIntyre wrote a feminist analysis of the role of the mother in father-daughter incest in 1981.[23] He divided the criticism of mothers into four groups: (1)the way mothers are involved in the incest, (2)their personality characteristics, (3)their nonfulfillment of the roles of mother and wife, and (4)their reactions to the discovery of incest. He felt that women are judged unfairly when they are accused of abandoning the home after simply developing outside interests for personal fulfillment, that both parents should be responsible for emotional support in the home, and that the mother's initial denial often led to the mother being accused of having set up

the incestuous situation. Feminists noted that abuse was committed mostly by males against females and attached blame to our patriarchal society where the male is given more power than the female, rather than to the dysfunction of families.

In 1984 Myer's research divided mother into: (1)those who protected their daughters and rejected their mates, (2)those who did nothing, and (3)those who rejected their daughters and protected their mates.[24] Over half of Myer's sample acted to immediately protect their daughters and 60% of that group would have been diagnosed as dependent. All but ten mothers in her sample overcame their initial denial. Fifteen mothers who refused to participate were described as battered. She states that in most of these situations the mother is a non-offending parent and has also been victimized. Truesdell, McNeil and Deschner reinforce this in 1986 when they wrote, "Recent findings suggest that the mother is often the victim herself, a victim of wife abuse."[25] Their study reported wife abuse more common in incestuous families than in the general population. Finkelhor's study also in 1986 linked the oppression of wives and the victimization of daughters.[26]

The Need to Empower Mothers

Women in general and mothers in particular are limited by society's interpretations to act within a very narrow ribbon of suitable behavior. They are forced to live continually within a double bind. Their parenting actions are often called indifferent and aloof or overattentive and overinvolved. As Nelson noted, "...the tenacious grip of mother blame theories has barely been loosened...Likewise, mothers of incest victims often

seem to be caught in a catch-22 and blamed for whatever they do, for conscious and unconscious behavior, for dependence and dominance, for promiscuity and frigidity."[27] If children turn out well it is because of the child's innate talent and if children are deficient it is the result of poor nurturance. Little value is put on the role of the mother. One only has to look at the national pay scale and what jobs are paid the most money. If our culture truly thought child raising was important, child care workers would be highly paid, there would be tax deductions for stay at home mothers or fathers, the experience would be honored at job reentry, and ADC would not be as controversial an issue.

In child sexual abuse cases, especially where incest and divorce is involved, the double bind of motherhood in general has emerged as a double jeopardy situation. If the mother needs to make accusations, she faces being accused of being malicious and of prompting children. If she does not make an accusation, she is faced with possible negligence charges due to being unprotective and incompetent. The backlash surrounding sexual abuse accusations and divorce proceedings does not seem to recognize that the proceedings themselves often provide the first needed distance from the power of the perpetrator that allows the non-offending spouse to feel safe enough to make accusations. Even Tormes "described her incestuous father subjects as having broken a radio over a mother's head, burned the children with hot irons, locked a mother in the closet while sexually abusing their child yet nevertheless, concluded that a father's incestuous behavior is the result of the failure of the mother to protect her child."[28] If we could decrease battering we would also diminish child abuse. Parents, especially mothers, would be

better able to safeguard their children, and the cycle of anger that leads to lashing out would be mostly destroyed.

Society seems to demand that mothers protect their children and yet takes away many of the tools needed to do so. In our society it is still difficult enough for a woman to get a well paid, high status job to help her gain stature and serve as a power base. Even if she does attain such a position, if she behaves defensively or hysterically, especially in a court dealing with child sexual abuse, this behavior will often be misinterpreted as vindictiveness. As a result visitation without supervision may be given to a perpetrator. Lost is the thought of possibly making a mistake on the side of protecting the child since none of us really "know" what has really happened in these situations. Courts are power sources in themselves and they often understand a good exhibition of power presented before them, admire the display, and reward it. The best clues to what really happened are always in the child's testimony and courts sometimes have difficulty hearing what the children are saying for various reasons. When they are able to testify the children have had to repeat their story many times. Courts have no mechanism for gauging the emotional distance that children must put between themselves and the trauma as time passes in order to go on in their lives.

Being a mother in our society easily leads to low self-esteem without additional trauma. It takes inordinate emotional stability to maintain high self-esteem within society's framework for women. For proof go to a cocktail party and listen to the silence after the question, "What do you do?" is answered with, "housewife." Poor self feelings often lead to expectations of rejection. When poor behavior realizes this self-fulfilling

prophecy, there is defensive withdrawal, then anger, and then outward aggression usually from men and inward depression in women due to the behavior our culture prescribes for each gender. Zuravin showed that there is about 180% greater risk of abuse when mothers are depressed.[29] If we are not able to change self-esteem, this cycle will continue throughout lifetimes and generations. That is why empowerment is so crucial in preventing child abuse of all kinds and especially incest.

Abuse, power, and parenting are all linked. When people act out and abuse they are looking to gain back their control over feelings of helplessness. The word power has positive connotations like strength, action, and status. It also conjures up negative feelings with words like manipulation, intimidation, and dominance. These latter associations are not truly powerful, rather they are pseudo-power. One is really feeling powerless at those times rather than powerful. Abuse is connected with those moments of pseudo-power. Who would not feel like wringing the child's neck in that commercial where the boy's moving remote controlled toy truck latches onto the bottom of a tablecloth and pulls all the prepared food for a party to the floor? It is because we all feel hopelessly helpless at those moments. Yet when we feel basically good about ourselves, we laugh at such experiences. Using humor as a mature defense mechanism is obviously more appropriate than acting out when we feel helpless.

If a mother is falsely accusing a father of sexual abuse during a divorce proceeding this too would be a grab at false power. In some families the power struggles might become so intense that the parents will stop at nothing to gain the upper hand in the relationship. Yet it must be remembered that understanding when an accusation is made, like when publicly

announcing that a child has AIDS, the entire family takes the chance they will be forced to live with society's rebuffs. It is difficult to believe that there are many who would purposefully choose to take on the difficulties of the ensuing taint that society may assign.

Truesdell, et. al., point out that, "Perhaps in blaming the mother, professionals are trying to reduce their own cognitive dissonance between the culture's image of men as powerful and their actual behavior....Professional caregivers, theorists, and practitioners should not assume that because a woman worked or has sexual difficulties with her husband, she is consciously or unconsciously substituting her child for herself in the role of sex partner. Continuing to blame the mother and to call her the cornerstone of her child's victimization is unjust: it is a way of blaming the victim."[3°] Women who are themselves being abused have little chance of helping their children. It is like asking one of the inmates of a P.O.W. camp to protect the other inmates. Logically, if we want abuse ended we must strengthen women with real competence so that they do not feel any need for vengeance. If mothers continue to be seen as inept and resistant, who will become the role models for our daughters and grandchildren?

Until recently there has been little push by society for women to gain the skills necessary to survive alone. We must wonder how a person, who has no real foundation for self care, can provide for others without easily succumbing to any sort of intimidation. The main feeling that might lead a mother to dreadful behavior is fear. Yet fear is a discounted emotion because mothers are supposed to be capable of making choices, yet often all the viable alternatives have been eliminated by the power of the offender in abusive cases. Decisions that might be

made often lead to ambivalence. Should she divorce and lose her identity plus the social approval of a two parent home?

The concept of co-dependency in alcohol treatment reflects the problems of mothers in abusive families. Significant others of the alcoholic become addicted to trying to help the abusive alcoholic. Mothers in abusive situations also have been found to support the offender even to the point of becoming a co-defender. Co-dependents have been accused of becoming chameleons. They defer to the potent source in the family. "Co-dependents are literally addicted to loving those who abuse, misuse or simply use them."[31]

Empowering Mothers

Any diminishing of one family role is a danger to all of the other positions. In order to avoid abuse we must build esteem, or our individual feelings of specialness, our sense of our own values, our ability to feel a sense of self-control, and a feeling of belonging to something safe. Finding a safe group to belong to can often be difficult for individuals caught in abuse. Since they have often been isolated in pathologically enmeshed family systems they often lack the skills to develop supportive friendship circles. Leaving their family leaves them belonging to nothing. This is one of the reasons that therapeutic groups form. In order to feel true self-esteem people must belong to groups that are supportive. Yet even when appropriate group membership has been established, holidays can still retrigger problems, The newly created support system might not be the kind of group that makes holiday dinners.

Giaretto discovered how empowering groups can be. He found

that mothers found allies and relief from their guilt by being with others who have had the same experience. They gained confidence that they could problem solve and help the other people in their group. The ability to verbalize their pain showed them that if they could speak about it, they could overcome it. Self-esteem empowerment comes from working to develop an awareness of ones feelings and facing negative feelings. In therapy we often do many experiential exercises to accomplish the recognition of conflicting and changing feelings. Whatever their feelings are, they must be validated or confronted, and the child within reparented.

A helpful concept in dealing with the complex feelings that stem from sexual abuse is the idea of primary and secondary victimization. It alleviates the shame when the mother can think of herself as a secondary victim rather than the cause of the abuse. The child is the primary victim and the perpetrator is to blame. If collusion really does exist, as sometimes happens, the mother is responsible for her atrocious behavior, but is still a secondary victim. A similar situation existed in Nazi concentration camps. There were prisoners who colluded with the Nazis and became prison guards, yet they would never have been incarcerated at all if it were not for Nazi victimization. If there is ever to be any type of healing between a mother and her child it is important that they both recognize the mother as a secondary victim. The importance of a mother's relationship with her child can never be overemphasized. Being a secondary victim allows the ego a way to self forgive and then rebuild lives.

There is an issue around whether the mothers or secondary victims should apologize to the primary victim. Both McIntyre and Truesdell, et. al. concluded that this should absolutely not

happen. They were not recognizing the necessity of the secondary victim and the primary victim healing any bad feelings that have come between them. Although primary victims may deny their feelings and protect secondary victims, they are always angry with the secondary victim. These feelings stem from children always thinking that their mothers are omnipotent. When they have to shield their mothers rather than being safeguarded themselves, their inner anger only increases. Non-offending mothers do not need to apologize for the abuse, they must say that they are sorry that the child experienced abuse. These words are the same as the words we express to the mourners of a loved one. We cannot take away the incidents and we cannot bring back the dead, yet we can say words that comfort. They recognize the grief and loss involved, and tell the primary victim that the secondary victim understands how the primary victim feels which establishes a basis for the future. Offending mothers, of course, must take responsibility for their actions, and they must apologize to initiate any healing.

Mothers need to be empowered through having all the current information available shared with them. Education allows emotionally charged feelings to sufficiently neutralize to let people deal when they are ready with the many issues that arise. The educational process also increases self-esteem through human respect. The women feel the confidence others have in their learning ability and understanding. Choices that did not seem to exist previously may become reasonable. As in our American form of government the ability to make choices is the root of true power. Learning develops self-awareness and the ability to give oneself and others strokes for just existing unrelated to anything that a person might be doing. Gaining skills in

counseling techniques such as reflection and active listening helps in interpersonal relationships. Self-assured moms can be consistent, work over time without resentment, be consistent yet flexible, build security and independence, help solve problems and still be able to say "I don't know."

In general, despite the mommy trap, women still act as if they value traditional patterns as much as men. Since we are all surviving, why change what is comfortable? It is difficult for women to question their so called obligations to solve all problems, know all feelings, and provide all needed nurturance, since this role as supreme healer is the only status that was given to women for many centuries. Nelson questions, "...how differently mothers might have behaved when daughters first sought their help, if they believed women deserved the same respect, independence and sexual fulfillment as men."[32] Incest can be thought of as the ultimate sexism. One becomes a sexual object even in one's own home. If society starts to value mothers and daughters as much as fathers and sons, then being a sexual object anywhere, much less in one's home, will become impossible. No mother would again have to face the conflict of duty and loyalty to child or husband that currently brings so much criticism to so many women. Yet as long as so many professionals see women as collusive, they are making it impossible for families to heal. Mothers must be able to find a balance between their family role and their personhood. Mothers universally developing confidence, reaching out from isolation, and becoming in tune with their children will help protect future generations.

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